



DOCUMENTARY FILMS

FROM ACADEMY AWARD® WINNERS
SIMON CHINN, DAN LINDSAY, & TJ MARTIN
AND EMMY AWARD® WINNER **JONATHAN CHINN**

LA 92

THE PAST IS PROLOGUE



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PRESENTS A LIGHTBOX PRODUCTION
"LA 92"

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY **DANNY BENSI & SAUNDER JURRIAANS**

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

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The Los Angeles Riots: A Timeline

March 3, 1991	Police pull Rodney King from his car, kick him, and beat him with their nightsticks. The incident is recorded by a photographer, George Holliday, who is watching from his balcony.
March 16, 1991	Teenager Latasha Harlins is fatally shot by Soon Ja Du, a Korean storeowner, after an altercation over a bottle of orange juice. In October, the latter is convicted, sentenced to probation, and assessed a \$500 fine.
April 29, 1992	<p>Sgt. Stacey C. Koon and Officers Laurence M. Powell, Theodore J. Briseno, and Timothy E. Wind are acquitted of assault and use of deadly force by a jury in Simi Valley.</p> <p>Beer cans are thrown at motorists passing the intersection of Florence and Normandie. Police respond, but then retreat.</p> <p>Demonstrators protest at police headquarters.</p> <p>Truck driver Reginald Denny is pulled from the cab of his truck and beaten nearly to death; he is rescued by four strangers.</p> <p>Fires, looting, and violence spread. Mayor Tom Bradley declares a state of emergency and Gov. Pete Wilson activates the National Guard.</p>
April 30, 1992	<p>A citywide curfew from sunset to sunrise is imposed.</p> <p>The National Guard is deployed to points around Los Angeles.</p>
May 1, 1992	<p>Scores of merchants arm themselves to protect their businesses.</p> <p>More than a thousand people gather at a peace rally supported by Korean Americans and others.</p> <p>The city of Pomona declares a state of emergency.</p> <p>Rodney King makes a public statement asking people to just “get along.”</p> <p>Federal troops, including Marines, arrive in Los Angeles.</p>
May 2, 1992	<p>The first individuals of the approximately 6,000 people arrested for looting and arson are arraigned.</p> <p>A peace march of 30,000 people takes place.</p>
May 3, 1992	Mayor Bradley announces the lifting of the curfew.
October 21, 1992	An investigating commission criticizes the L.A. Police Department and City Hall for failing to plan for civil disorder as a response to the verdict.
April 17, 1993	Officers Koon and Powell are convicted by a federal jury in a second trial of violating Rodney King’s civil rights and, several months later, they are sentenced to 2½ years in prison. The other two officers are acquitted.

South Central in 1992: Fuel for the Fire

In the five decades between the entry of the United States into World War II and the beating of Rodney King, much change occurred in the district of Los Angeles known as South Central. Wartime industries, with racial discrimination banned by the federal government, attracted millions of black workers from the South to Northern cities, including Los Angeles. Many migrated to South Central, the only district in otherwise segregated Los Angeles where blacks were allowed to own property. Even after the 1948 Supreme Court ruling in *Shelley v. Kraemer* forbade discriminatory housing covenants, segregation was enforced in other ways.

The early 1950s saw the growth of large public housing projects and the rise of both black and white gangs. Despite the 1964 Civil Rights Act, California continued to allow segregation. There were also widespread reports and complaints of police brutality in South Central, stemming from a military-like police led by Police Chief William Parker. The Watts riots of 1965—precipitated by the arrest of an African American motorist—led to violence, 34 deaths, and millions of dollars in damages. The Black Power Movement was born at this time and gang violence briefly declined. However, within a

few years, the economic situation among Los Angeles blacks deteriorated, in part because of the shift nationally from manufacturing to service industries, and gang-related violence occurred more frequently. The introduction of cocaine in 1981 worsened the situation as gangs competed to control the drug trade, murders multiplied, and many young black men were incarcerated. South Central Los Angeles in 1992 was the failure of a promise. The modern civil rights movement had been under way for more than 30 years. The programs for Lyndon Johnson's Great Society had come and gone.

By 1992, the community was growing more diverse; it was also home to a large Latino minority and a much smaller Asian and Asian-American one in addition to the black majority. Despite the hopes engendered by the civil rights movement and urban reform, South Central continued to seethe from gang violence, police brutality, unemployment, high rates of alcoholism and drug addiction, and an astonishingly large number of murders. Resentment of police was high among many residents.

What exactly is a riot? What pre-existing conditions would make it likely that a riot could occur?

Take a look at the profile of South Central compiled by the Los Angeles Times, based on the first census following the 1992 riots: <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/historic-south-central/>. What pre-conditions seemed to exist?

Precipitants are the causes that touch off an event when pre-conditions are right. What were the precipitants of the Los Angeles riots in 1992?

Given these preconditions, were the riots inevitable? Or could action by the city officials or police officials have prevented them?



Rodney King and Latasha Harlins



Born in 1965, Rodney King grew up in a multiracial neighborhood in Altadena, north of Pasadena, California. His father had alcohol problems and was abusive; his mother was strict but loving. He described his childhood in his memoir *The Riot Within: My Journey from Rebellion to Redemption*, in which he also recalled the beginning of his “dance with the devil,” his addiction to alcohol. Although the police who beat him claimed they thought he was under the influence of PCP, tests showed none, only the presence of alcohol. King was a taxi driver, and had three daughters.

Thirteen days after the beating of Rodney King, a 15-year-old girl, Latasha Harlins, a student at Westchester High School, went to a local liquor store to buy a bottle of orange juice. The Korean store owner, Soon Ja Du, accused her of shoplifting and an altercation ensued. Video reviewed by police after the fact confirmed that Harlins was in fact not stealing juice. As the girl put the bottle back on the counter and turned to leave, the owner shot her in the back of the head. At the trial, the owner was convicted of voluntary manslaughter, but was sentenced to only 400 hours of community service and a \$500 fine, not the 16-year imprisonment that was the maximum possible sentence. Joyce Karlin, the judge in the Latasha

Harlins case, was widely criticized by community leaders for levying what they felt was an unprecedented sentence. The shooting exacerbated tensions between the black and Korean communities; it has been estimated that 65 percent of the businesses burned during the riots were owned by members of the Korean community.

The beating of Rodney King was filmed by an amateur videographer who just happened to live in the area where it happened; the beating of Reginald Denny was caught on camera by a helicopter news crew; the shooting death of Latasha Harlins was caught on security camera footage. In what ways did each of the media used in these events affect the events of the Los Angeles riots?

What do you think police officers thought and saw when they encountered Rodney King? What do you think the Korean store owner saw when she encountered Latasha Harlins? How can our views about others—including unconscious biases—impact our later actions?

Review the scene in LA92 when Rodney King speaks to the press (approximately 1:54:18—1:58:30). What is your reaction to this scene? What do you think Rodney King is feeling while speaking? Why do you think he was willing to speak at this time?

What is community policing? How does it affect the community in which it is practiced? Does it reduce crime? How do local police feel about this movement? How does it affect the lives of police officers?

Should all police be required to wear body cameras when responding to an incident? What protections do body cameras offer for people who are arrested? Do they offer protections for the police themselves?



The Trial, the Verdict, and the Response

A little more than a week after the beating of Rodney King, a grand jury returned an indictment against the four police officers. The judge assigned to the case granted a change of venue, to Simi Valley, a conservative, mostly white town nearby. An all-white jury was seated. King himself did not testify. The officers who testified stated that they had feared for their lives, and several other witnesses offered conflicting accounts. Despite viewing the videotape numerous times, the jury acquitted the officers of all but one charge against one officer.

The expectation in Los Angeles, based on the videotape evidence, had clearly been a verdict of guilty. Within several hours after the verdict was announced, protests, sometimes violent, began in South Central; soon after, fires were burning and rioting and looting were widespread. More than 50 people were killed, hundreds were injured, more than 7,000 were arrested, and a billion dollars' worth of property was damaged. The riots were finally brought under control with assistance from the National Guard and other federal forces.

In February 1993, the Justice Department trial of the officers for violating Rodney King's civil rights began. The jury was no longer all white and the federal prosecutors had learned from the prior state trial and altered their strategy. Eventually, two of the officers were found guilty and sentenced to 30 months in a federal correctional camp; the other two were acquitted. There were no subsequent riots after the verdict. King won a \$3.8 million verdict from the City of Los Angeles.

Why do you think the jury acquitted the officers despite the evidence provided by the videotape?

Why do you think the judge changed the venue in the case?

How might the history of race relations in Los Angeles have affected the later riots?

Why did violence begin so immediately? Why did it spread so quickly? What was the impact of the beating of truck driver Reginald Denny?

Why did the rioters target Korean-owned businesses so frequently? In what ways did the Korean community respond? Were their responses effective in protecting the community?

Why were the authorities so surprised by the outbreak of violence? Could they have responded more quickly? What else could they have done? Could anything have been done to stop the violence in the early stages?

Are riots and uprisings ever justified? If so, when? If not, why not? What can be done to prevent riots in future situations like this?

In your opinion, did Rodney King receive justice? Why, or why not?





The Characteristics of Riots and Community Uprisings

The riots that followed the Rodney King verdict broke out very quickly, too quickly to have been planned and organized. Why did the Los Angeles riot, and the 1965 Watts riot, the riots in 1968 in numerous American cities, and the recent riot in Baltimore occur?

A recent article¹ published by the African American Intellectual History Society found four commonalities in race riots, whether by whites or blacks:

- Large numbers of people doubt that the legal system will fix injustices.
- Race riots are usually urban, occurring where large groups of people gather. This may be either a spontaneous gathering or a scheduled gathering that becomes unfocused.
- A strong show of force by law enforcement without one-on-one engagement with protesters usually makes things worse.
- Riots cause long-term social and economic damage to the communities where a riot takes place.

What systemic changes could have been made by the Los Angeles Police Department to prevent the beating of Rodney King, and potentially prevent the later riots?

Did the riots after the beating of Rodney King fit the pattern described above? In what way, or why not? What evidence from the film supports your conclusion?

What do you think prompted most people who chose to join in the riots?



Have you ever been in a large group of people who seemed swayed by a common strong emotion? How did you feel? What happened as a result?

Most of the people who join in these uprisings are relatively young. Why do you think this is the case?

Three individuals, all African American and all strangers to Reginald Denny, saw what was happening on television, realized the attack was in their own neighborhood, and came out to join another person to rescue him and drive him to the hospital. Why do you think these four people acted as they did? How difficult is it to take a stand against the group? Can you cite any other examples in which you saw someone take a stand despite personal risk?

What kinds of damage did the riots do to the neighborhoods of Los Angeles where they occurred?

¹ Brian Purnell, "Why Race Riots Happen in U.S. Cities." Black Perspectives (May 1, 2015). <http://www.aaihs.org/why-race-riots-happen-in-us-cities/>.

After the Riots

The damage done by the riots to South Central and other neighborhoods in Los Angeles was extensive. The burned buildings, smashed windows, and looted store shelves reflected the violence that occurred. How did the City of Los Angeles respond after peace was restored?

Some of the plans included:

- A jobs program called Rebuild L.A., which aimed to create 57,000 jobs, in part by bringing in new supermarkets to the area.
- An effort to limit the large number of liquor stores in South Central.
- The use of financial incentives such as tax credits and wage credits to encourage businesses to invest in South Central (Empowerment Zones).
- Dramatic reform of the police department, including additional training, the introduction of more nonlethal tools such as pepper spray, and the virtual abandonment of the type of baton that had been used on Rodney King.

Of these proposals, only the reform of the police department was really transformative.

Today, South Central Los Angeles is demographically different. The Latino population is now a majority in the area, due to an influx of Latin Americans and an outflow of many from the black community. Its population is becoming more middle-class. Even its name has changed. South Central, by order of the city council, is now officially South Los Angeles.

Why were the initiatives such as the Empowerment Zone, created to rebuild places such as South Central, largely ineffective after the riots?

What fundamental reforms to the criminal justice system could be made to bring greater equity in cases like those of Latasha Harlins and Rodney King? How does the lack of reforms lead to disillusionment in communities like South Central?

How have the media, including films such as Training Day, Boyz 'N the Hood, and Straight Outta Compton, portrayed South Central?

What more could be done to improve life for residents of the inner cities? Propose three specific strategies that could bring about positive change and explain what it would take to implement them. How would they make a difference?

What is the group Black Lives Matter trying to achieve? What kind of impact is the group having? Do you think they will ultimately be successful? Why has there been so much controversy when politicians respond that “All lives matter”?

What are the “Promise Zones” established by the Obama administration? Will these be more effective than the Empowerment Zones of the Clinton era?



A New Age of Protest



The 1960s and early 1970s brought an era of protests, marches, and demonstrations, mostly for civil rights and in opposition to the Vietnam War; television brought these events right to American viewers with an immediacy they had never before experienced. The average American could now watch demonstrators being beaten or dispersed with firehoses on the evening news, and this may have been part of the reason that there was widespread support for the Civil Rights Act.

After the beating of Rodney King and LA riots, attacks on unarmed black men continued. In 1999, police fatally shot

Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo 41 times as he entered his own apartment. *Rolling Stone* magazine documented ten other subsequent cases in which black men were killed and justice was denied. (<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/black-lives-matter-11-racist-police-killings-with-no-justice-served-20141204>). In the last few years, video cameras available on cell phones have documented a number of killings of unarmed black men (and boys) by police. Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and 12-year-old Tamir Rice are a few examples that have come to national attention through this means.



The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. The organization has continued to grow, working to protest racial profiling and police brutality through direct action protests and marches and through extensive use of the media. The organization has motivated many to become allies, but has also stirred up bitter opposition.

Today, we seem to be entering another period of political activism, with events like the Women's March on Washington on the day after the presidential inauguration in 2017, airport demonstrations to protest executive orders about travel bans, and a teach-in by scientists on the National Mall, to name a few. Local demonstrations and marches are occurring throughout the country. A recent Pepsi commercial (which was quickly withdrawn after harsh criticism for insensitivity) reflected both this tendency toward greater citizen involvement in direct action and the potential for hostile interaction between police and marchers.

"Race relations is America's Achilles' heel," said producers Jonathan Chinn and Simon Chinn. "The production of this film might mark the 25th anniversary of this seminal uprising, but these kinds of events still recur, and we are still dealing with their root causes. Our goal with *LA 92* is to reframe the story of this tragedy for a modern audience, and we hope it will encourage reflection and debate as we wrestle with these very real conflicts that continue to plague America's cities."

As in the cases of Rodney King and Latasha Harlins, videotapes from dashcams and observers have recently created major controversies, stirring outrage and activism. Here are a few examples:

The shooting of Walter Scott in South Carolina (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/08/us/south-carolina-officer-is-charged-with-murder-in-black-mans-death.html>)

The death of Eric Garner after a chokehold (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2014/dec/04/i-cant-breathe-eric-garner-chokehold-death-video>)

The shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice (<http://www.cnn.com/videos/justice/2016/04/25/cleveland-tamir-rice-lawsuit-settlement-vo-nr-costello.cnn/video/playlists/tamir-rice-shooting/>)

If you observed such an incident happening, would you videotape it? Are you legally allowed to do so? If police tell you to stop videotaping, do you have to obey? (You might wish to review the American Civil Liberties website under "Additional Resources" at the end of this guide.)

Why do you think America still has not fully dealt with its race problem? What stands in the way?

Are these protests and marches likely to remain peaceful? Why, or why not?

Since 1992, computers with Internet connection have become widely available, cell phones capture events immediately, and social media platforms help videos go viral with astonishing speed. What impact will these technologies have on contemporary protests?

Since the advent of Black Lives Matter, some have responded by saying that "All lives matter." Police in some areas and their supporters have formed Blue Lives Matter. What is your response to these developments?



The Making of *LA92*

Producers Simon and Jonathan Chinn might have been tempted to film a fictional narrative or docudrama, focusing on events experienced by a few major characters and set during the 1992 riots in Los Angeles. Instead, they decided to take a novel approach. Bypassing the usual route of a narrator who links interviews with “talking head” experts and pundits, the filmmakers worked exclusively with archival footage and photographs, arranging them sequentially to let viewers piece together the tumultuous narrative for themselves. From thousands of hours of broadcast news footage, radio reports, police files and personal home videos that have never been broadcast, they selected elements that would represent a variety of points of view.

How do you feel about the filmmakers’ decision to tell the story entirely through raw footage and without any narration or talking heads? What advantages does this approach have? What disadvantages?

Do you think the news coverage of the 1992 and 1993 was biased? If so, in what way(s)? If not, explain why you think it is objective.

How is news coverage different today from 25 years ago? Consider such developments as:

- the time that it takes to transmit a story or photograph
- the transition to digital photography and video
- the prevalence of social media such as Twitter and Instagram
- the impact of the Internet
- the wide availability of video capability on cell phones
- the ability to transmit coverage by satellite from almost anywhere in the world
- the comments sections of online news sources
- the ubiquity of blogs and other opinion websites

How has each of these developments affected news coverage? Do these changes make news more objective or more biased?

How do you approach the news to be sure you are learning about objective reality rather than “alternative facts”?



Additional Resources

Los Angeles Times Staff, “The L.A. Riots: 24 Years Later”

<http://timelines.latimes.com/los-angeles-riots/>

Rosanna Xia, “Where Are They Now?” (The fates of major figures in the L.A. riots)

<http://graphics.latimes.com/towergraphic-where-they-are-now/>

Timeline from “Crips and Bloods: Made in America” (PBS Independent Lens)

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/cripsandbloods/timeline.html>

American Civil Liberties Union, “Your Right to Record and Observe the Police”

<https://www.aclupa.org/issues/policepractices/your-right-record-and-observe-police>

Rodney’s King’s final interview from the Oprah Winfrey show:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2w8-M3nDwg>

Law professor Douglas Linder’s detailed account of the criminal and civil trials

<http://www.famous-trials.com/lapd/584-home>

Brian Purnell’s article “Why Race Riots Happen in U.S. Cities”

<http://www.aaihs.org/why-race-riots-happen-in-us-cities/>

Interview with Tamara Avent, Psychology Program Director at South University, on “the mob mentality”

<http://source.southuniversity.edu/examining-the-mob-mentality-31395.aspx>

A description of how Los Angeles tried to resolve the problems that had led to the riots

<https://placesjournal.org/article/20-years-later-legacies-of-the-los-angeles-riots/>

An article about the Korean community in Los Angeles and the impact of the riots

<http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-15>

A report on contemporary “Promise Zones” to improve inner cities from Southern California Public Radio

<http://www.scpr.org/news/2016/06/06/61365/obama-administration-designates-south-la-as-promis/>

Publications of the National Center for Community Policing at the University of Michigan

<http://cj.msu.edu/programs/regional-community-policing-institute/national-center-community-policing-publications/>

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This discussion guide for *LA92* was written by Eileen Mattingly of Journeys in Film.

For additional free materials to bring the world to your classroom and to explore significant issues through film, see the website <http://journeysinfilm.org>.



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